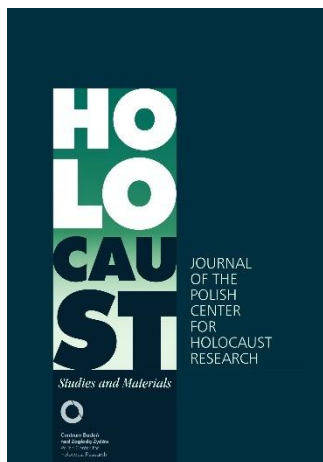




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“Food Provision in the Camp Is Purportedly Excellent...” What the Łódź Ghetto Residents Knew About the Chełmno nad Nerem Death Centre

***„Zaprowiantowanie obozu jest podobno wzorowe...”
Wiedza więźniów getta łódzkiego na temat ośrodka
zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem***

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**“The provision of food to the camp is said
to be exemplary...”
What the Łódź Ghetto Prisoners Knew About
the Chełmno Death Camp**

Abstract

Information about the extermination being conducted in the Chełmno death camp reached the Łódź ghetto in the spring of 1942. An important link in the flow of information was Grabów, reached by the first escapees from Chełmno nad Nerem. Rabbi Jakub Szulman played a large role as he started sending letters with information about the crimes obtained from the escapees. The letters he wrote reached Łódź together with people resettled from the provincial ghettos of Wartheland. They confirmed the information about the purpose of the Chełmno camp. The information flow was also affected by the information blockade campaign conducted by the Germans, something followed by a misinformation campaign regarding the actual fate of the people deported to Chełmno.

Keywords

Łódź ghetto, Kulmhof, Chełmno nad Nerem death camp, Łódź, Grabów

The April 14, 1942 entry in *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* reads:

On April 12, a high officer of the secret police [Gestapo], who is serving as the commander of the camp where the people deported from this ghetto are now located, briefly visited the Bałuty Market Square. This is the first definite source of information concerning the deportees [...]. [T]he camp is located in the region directly bordering the town of Koło [...]. They left the barracks in perfectly decent order, and even left their furniture for the Jews to use. The provision of food to the camp is said to be exemplary. Those fit to work are employed on the camp grounds [...].¹

¹ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941–1944*, vol. 2: 1942, ed. Lucjan Dobroszycki (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 145, entries of April 10–14, 1942.

This is the first piece of information about the mass extermination camp in Chełmno nad Nerem to have appeared in the official documents of the Jewish administration of the ghetto. With the exception of the camp's location², all of the above information proved false. For the camp which purportedly enjoyed "exemplary" food provision was actually an extermination center, as was confirmed to the ghetto residents several months later. The route by which the information about Chełmno reached the Łódź ghetto, along with the reactions of its residents to that news, are an interesting research problem for several reasons. Retracing the information about the Chełmno death camp's operation makes it possible to learn how it reached the communities imprisoned in the ghettos and what mechanisms governed its distribution inside the closed quarters. Łódź ghetto residents were interested in information of this kind, particularly as concerned their deported family members and friends. Learning about their fate could bring peace or – quite the reverse. For it could intensify anxiety; prompt one to make plans for the future; and incite one to devise a survival strategy. At the same time, the German authorities were trying to keep their crimes a secret for as long as possible – though their efforts were to prove unsuccessful.

This study undertakes to recreate something that is difficult to pinpoint – namely, what the residents of the closed quarter knew about the death camp in Chełmno. The starting point is an attempt to reconstruct the channels through which that news flowed and was disseminated – as well as its chronology and consequences. The following questions shall aid my analysis: Did the residents know about Chełmno? When and how did they learn about it? What did they know about Chełmno? How did they handle the news? But the clearly dominant victim's perspective shall not be the only one I am interested in. To get a full picture it seems necessary to also answer questions as to what the German authorities did to conceal the information about the camp and its intended use and what they did to prevent that information from reaching the ghetto residents.

Insufficient research has been conducted on what the ghetto prisoners knew about the mass extermination camps – or more broadly speaking, about the anti-Jewish extermination campaign. Not a single text devoted exclusively to the issue of my interest, that is, what the residents of the Litzmannstadt³ closed quarter were aware of, has been published. Only in the key monographs of the Łódź ghetto can one find small pieces of information about the reaction

² Chełmno is located approx. 15 kilometers from Koło.

³ As per the April 11, 1940 ordinance issued by the German occupation authorities the city of Łódź was renamed Litzmannstadt in tribute to General Karl von Litzmann – a World War I hero and NSDAP member from 1930 (Miroslaw Cygański, *Z dziejów okupacji hitlerowskiej w Łodzi* [From the history of the Nazi occupation in Łódź] [Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1965], p. 102). I use the names Łódź and Litzmannstadt interchangeably in reference to the German-occupied city.

to the news of the extermination being conducted in Chełmno.⁴ The research on the Litzmannstadt ghetto in this respect is no exception here, for the topic of my interest has been analyzed only with regard to the Warsaw ghetto and the Treblinka death camp.⁵

The primary sources for research on what the ghetto prisoners knew about the Chełmno camp are found in two groups of documents. The first one is the official documentation produced by the cells of the Jewish administration of the Łódź ghetto, for instance, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto* kept by the Archive Department, as well as by the Nazi terror apparatus. The second group is that of the personal testimonies of the ghetto residents and escapees and witnesses to the mass murder at the camp. This information can be supplemented with reference literature devoted to the closed quarter in Litzmannstadt and the camp in Chełmno nad Nerem.

The initiative to exterminate the Jews in the Nazi-occupied region they called Wartheland (on the Warta river) came in mid-1941 from the Province's top authorities, led by Arthur Greiser. By September 12, 1941 Greiser obtained Adolf Hitler's permission to 'liquidate' approx. 100,000 Jews from Wartheland.⁶ Already that autumn the first attempts at mass murder of that population were begun. Commanded by *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Lange, the *SS-Sonderkommando* Lange was deployed there especially for that purpose. It exterminated residents of the ghettos in Grodziec, Rzgów, and Zagórów in forests near Konin.⁷ The

⁴ This issue has been presented in the most comprehensive way by Andrea Löw, see eadem, *Getto łódzkie/Litzmannstadt Getto. Warunki życia i sposoby przetrwania* [Łódź ghetto/Litzmannstadt ghetto. Living conditions and means of survival], trans. Małgorzata Półrola, Łukasz Marek Płes (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2012), pp. 224–229 [original edition: *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt. Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006)]. See also Icchak (H.) Rubin, *Żydzi w Łodzi pod niemiecką okupacją 1939–1945* [Jews in Łódź under German occupation 1939–1945] (London: Kontra, 1988), pp. 350–364; Adam Sitarek, "Wire Bound State". *The Structure and Functions of the Jewish Administration of the Łódź Ghetto* (Łódź-Warszawa: IPN, 2017), pp. 218–219.

⁵ For information about how much Warsaw ghetto residents knew reegarding the death camp in Treblinka see Martyna Rusiniak-Karwat, "Co wiedzieli i o czym myśleli Żydzi jadąc do obozu zagłady Treblinka II? [What did the Jews know and think when they went to the Treblinka II death camp?]," in *Co wiemy o Treblince? Stan badań* [What do we know about Treblinka? The state of research], ed. Edward Kopówka (Siedlce: Muzeum Regionalne, 2013), pp. 103–117; Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 679–683.

⁶ Michael Alberti, *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden im Reichsgau Wartheland 1939–1945* [Persecution and Extermination of Jews in Reichsgau Wartheland 1939–1945] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), pp. 400–407; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), vol. 2, pp. 589–590.

⁷ *Świadectwa Zagłady. Obóz w Chełmnie nad Nerem. Getto wiejskie Czachulec* [Holocaust Testimonies. The camp in Chełmno nad Nerem. Czachulec rural ghetto], ed. and selection of documents by Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak (Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2014): pp. 365–366; Jolanta Kraemer, "Grodziec," in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

victims were not only shot, but also gassed in a special gas chamber that had probably been used in *Aktion T4*.⁸

The decision to build the extermination center in the small locality of Chełmno (German name Kulmhof) on the Ner river was key for the later fate of the Jews in Wartheland. Situated in the eastern part of the province and close to communication routes, the camp was organized in a small palace on the outskirts of the village near a dense forest. The construction began in November 1941. The camp's staff consisted of 15 policemen from the SS and the Security Service (SD), approximately 100 policemen from *Schutzpolizei* (Schupo), and a group of 8 Poles, former prisoners of Fort VII in Poznań.⁹ The staff later increased to 75–85 people.¹⁰ The camp's first commandant was Herbert Lange, who managed it until the end of February 1942. In March 1942 Hans Bothmann took control. Under his command the camp operated until its liquidation in January 1945 (with a break from April 1943 to March 1944).¹¹ Aside from its most frequently used name, *Sonderkommando Kulmhof*, the camp was also named after its commandants – initially *Sonderkommando Lange* and then *Sonderkommando Bothmann*.

The first group of people – Jews from Koło – arrived in the camp on December 8, 1941. During the next weeks the same fate befell residents of the ghettos located closest to Chełmno – namely, those in Dąbie, Kowale Pańskie, Kłodawa, and Izbica situated in the districts of Koło, Turek, and Konin.¹² The camp operated until the beginning of April 1943, when the German authorities ordered it to be liquidated and all traces of the crimes committed there to be erased. In the spring of 1944 the camp was reopened, with the center of its operation shifted into the Rżuchów forest, while in Chełmno there remained only a group of laborers and the staff. The final groups of victims arrived at the camp in July 1944, after which date the Germans again began to cover up their crimes. The camp existed until January 18, 1945, when its German staff left the

Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945, vol. 2, part A, ed. Martin Dean (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 58; eadem, "Rzgów," in *ibidem*, p. 100; Evelyn Zegenhagen, Martin Dean, "Zagórów," in *ibidem*, p. 121.

⁸ Using a mobile gas chamber is mentioned in a witness testimony, see "Zeznanie Mieczysława Sękiewicza [Testimony of Mieczysław Sękiewicz]," in *Mówią świadkowie Chełmna* [Chełmno witnesses speak out], ed. Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak (Konin–Łódź: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, 2004), p. 90; *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, p. 39, footnote 70.

⁹ *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, pp. 31–33; Patrick Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust: The History of Hitler's First Death Camp* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 52–54. For more about the Poles who worked at the Chełmno camp see *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, pp. 71–73.

¹⁰ *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, p. 66.

¹¹ "Wykaz członków załogi obozu w Chełmnie nad Nerem [List of crew members of the camp in Chełmno nad Nerem]," in *ibidem*, pp. 604–606.

¹² *Mówią świadkowie...*, pp. 10–12; Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 70–72.

camp after having murdered the last of the craftsmen and Jewish workers who had been working there.¹³ The total number of people killed in the Chełmno death camp is estimated at 200,000.¹⁴

Information about the camp's location and what was happening in it had been filtering to the outside world almost from the first days of the camp's operation. In his testimony submitted to the Ringelblum Archive after January 1942, Uszer Taube¹⁵ from Kłodawa recalled that after the end of the deportation campaign from the Kłodawa ghetto "everybody knew that they would be deported to Chełmno (a village between Koło and Dąbie, called Kulmhof in German)."¹⁶ Taube stated that this information had come from a local clerk sent to Koło by order of the German manager of the Timber Traders' Union "who was regarded as a friend to Jews".¹⁷ Taube reported that after the brutal liquidation of the Zagórów Jews, the resettlement to the "Jewish village of Chełmno" was a source of hope. He also remembered that the Jews living in the small towns were worried that there were no food transports headed for Chełmno. Consequently, they tried to learn more about the fate of the deportees. Poles were used as messengers and informers. The Jews learned from Polish peasants that the Jews detained in the palace were murdered with the use of "specially constructed trucks which the Jews were packed into. One could hear outcries, weeping, and screams coming from the inside."¹⁸

A man named Wołkowicz from Dąbie, a locality just six kilometers from Chełmno, mentioned another attempt at obtaining information about the Chełmno camp. The local Judenrat sent him to Koło to find out about the deportation which had been organized there several days earlier, as it was expected that the same fate could soon befall Jews from Dąbie. His encounter with representatives of the Koło Judenrat made him suspect that the deportees had met a tragic fate.

¹³ *Świadcstwa Zagłady...*, pp. 51, 58–59; "Zeznanie Szymona Srebrnika [Testimony of Szymon Srebrnik]," in *Mówią świadkowie...*, pp. 122–123.

¹⁴ The exact number of victims remains unknown and is still a subject of research. The estimated number of victims is at least 150,000–170,000, while the testimonies giving the perpetrators' estimates speak of 250,000 victims. The figure 200,000 has been proposed by Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak as the most probable, cf. *Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* [Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance] (hereafter: AIPN), Main Commission, 165/271, vol. 4, Protokół przesłuchania Jana Gibaszka [Minutes of Jan Gibaszek's interrogation], p. 22; *Świadcstwa Zagłady...*, p. 65; Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 184–186.

¹⁵ This identification remains uncertain. It is based on Przemysław Nowicki and Tomasz Kuberczyk's proposition, see *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy* [Ringelblum Archive. Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto], vol. 9: *Tereny wcielone do Rzeszy: Kraj Warty* [Territories incorporated into the Reich: the Wartheland], ed. Magdalena Siek (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny and Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), p. 57, footnote 145.

¹⁶ "Relacja Uszera Taubego [Testimony of Uszer Taube]," in *ibidem*, vol. 9, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

His suspicions found confirmation in what he heard from a Polish clerk from Koło with whom he had an exchange on the way: "He told me that I should flee because the situation was horrible. He had seen airtight trucks drive into the forest, with fearful cries coming from the inside."¹⁹ Wołkowicz then shared that information with members of the Dąbie Judenrat.

On the day of the planned deportation from Dąbie, Wołkowicz fled from that town to Grabów, where he stayed for five weeks. During that time he met with escapees from the Chełmno camp²⁰ – Abraham Roj,²¹ Szlama Winer,²² and Mordechaj Podchlebnik – from whom²³ he learned detailed information about

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 73.

²⁰ The individuals mentioned below are not the only known escapees from the camp in Chełmno, but the role of their testimonies is key in the context of the information that reached the Łódź ghetto. More about other escapes see *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, pp. 42–47; Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 137–141.

²¹ Roj, who came from Izbica, was transported to Chełmno on January 6 or 9, 1942 with a group of Jews from Izbica and then allocated to work as a gravedigger in the Rzuchów forest. He escaped from the palace in Chełmno on the night of January 16, 1942. Several days later, around January 20–21, 1942, he reached Krośniewice, from where he went to Grabów after learning about other escapees. There, probably in late January, he met Winer. He then went to Wierzbnik via Koluszki, then he was deported to Auschwitz, from where he escaped in unclear circumstances. He lived in hiding until the liberation. See more on this topic in Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 109–110, 129–136.

²² Szlama Ber Winer arrived in Chełmno on January 6, 1942 with a group of men from Izbica. Just as Roj, he worked as a gravedigger. He escaped from the camp while being transported by bus to the Rzuchów forest. On January 19, 1942 he reached Grabów, where he told rabbi Jakub Szulman about the camp's operation. From there he fled to Piotrków Trybunalski and then to Warsaw, where he handed his testimony to Hersz Wasser and his wife Bluma, known as Jakub Grojnowski's report (Winer's assumed surname). The shocking testimony was included in the Ringelblum Archive, becoming the basis for the Oneg Shabbat group's first report entitled *Wypadki chełmińskie z połowy marca 1942 r.* [Events in Chełmno in mid-March 1942]. In late March 1942 Winer went to Zamość, from where he sent information to Wasser about the death center in Bełżec. He died there after being deported during the first liquidation campaign in the Zamość ghetto on April 11 or 12, 1942. See Przemysław Nowicki, "Zanim przybył z zaświatów", nazywał się Winer. Krąg rodzinny i konspiracyjny Szlamka, uciekiniera z ośrodka zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem [Before he "came from the other side," his name was Winer. The family and underground circle of Szlamka, an escapee from the Chełmno nad Nerem extermination center], *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 5 (2009): 185–191; *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 13: *Ostatnim etapem przesiedlenia jest śmierć. Pomiechówek, Chełmno nad Nerem, Treblinka* [The final stage of resettlement is death. Pomiechówek, Chełmno nad Nerem, Treblinka], eds Barbara Engelking, Alina Skibińska, Ewa Wiatr (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny and Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), pp. 82–83.

²³ Mordechaj (Michał) Podchlebnik from Koło came to Chełmno from the village of Bugaj before January 13, 1942 and escaped almost at the same time as Winer. He managed to reach Grabów on January 21, 1942, where he met with Winer, and then to Piotrków Trybunalski. According to one of the testimonies, he might have visited Gostynin, Krośniewice, and Warsaw on his way, but this is difficult to confirm. According to Podchlebnik, he reached Rzeszów via

the crimes being committed in Chełmno.²⁴ The information about the camp's purpose was also transferred to other people in Grabów – rabbi Jakub Szulman learned a lot from Winer. The escapee told him: “Rabbi, I come from the other side. [...] Rabbi, do not think that I am out of my mind. I am a Jew. I come from the underworld. The Jewish nation is being exterminated.”²⁵ According to Winer's testimony, his account shocked the rabbi and the information about the mass murder quickly spread around the town. Soon people began to come to him for more details: “When the news spread in town, crowds of Jews came to the rabbi and I told them in detail about the atrocities. They all wept.”²⁶ The information was passed on from there by Grabów's inhabitants, including rabbi Szulman, who included it in their letters to their loved ones in other towns and cities. It was also shared by the escapees who went to other localities, where they conveyed their experiences. Disseminated in letters and by word of mouth, the knowledge of what was happening in Chełmno spread in ever-widening circles.²⁷ What happened later with the news about the mass extermination at Chełmno indicates that Grabów was a key point in the information flow, also for the Jews of Łódź.

Following his conversation with Winer, rabbi Szulman immediately wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, which is said to have reached the Łódź ghetto.²⁸ The letter informed about the rabbi's meeting with an eye-witness who “by chance managed to escape from hell”, that is, Winer. Szulman then went on to quote the escapee's story:

The place where all these people are being murdered is called Chełmno, in the vicinity of Dąbie; the victims are buried in the nearby Łochów forest [actually Rzuchów – A. S.]. The people are killed by two methods: by

Tarnów, and then was in hiding in a village near Rzeszów, where he lived until the liberation. See “Zeznanie Michała Podchlebnika [Testimony of Michał Podchlebnik],” in *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, pp. 98–101; Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 129–132.

²⁴ “Relacja Lajba Wołkowicza [Testimony of Lajb Wołkowicz],” in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 9, p. 73.

²⁵ “Relacja Jakuba Grojnowskiego (Szlamy Ber Winer) [Testimony of Jakub Grojnowski (real. Szlama Ber Winer)],” in *ibidem*, vol. 13, p. 111.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Some of the letters which were sent from the next localities to Warsaw beginning with January 21, 1942, many of which spoke bluntly about the “gassing” of people at Chełmno, are collected in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 1: *Listy o Zagładzie* [Letters about the Holocaust], ed. Ruta Sakowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997), pp. 3–19.

²⁸ The original of the letter has not survived. It is referred to by Nachman Blumental in his anthology entitled *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [Documents and materials from the German occupation of Poland], vol. 1: *Obozy* [Camps], ed. Nachman Blumental (Łódź: Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, 1946), p. 233, and by Lucjan Dobroszycki in his introduction to *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto 1941–1944*, p. xxi. The letter is also mentioned by Patrick Montague (*Chełmno...*, p. 132), who assumes that it was delivered directly to the Łódź ghetto.

execution or by gassing [...]. Thousands of Gypsies from the 'Gypsy camp' in Łódź²⁹ have recently been brought there, and thousands of Jews from Łódź have been arriving [at Chełmno] for several days now³⁰ only to meet the same fate. Do not think this a lunatic's writing. Unfortunately, this is the cruel and tragic truth (Dear God!).³¹

The routes by which information about Chełmno was conveyed to Łódź:

1. Lajbe Wołkowicz's testimony, approx. December 1942.
2. Letter from unknown sender to Mote Altszuler, December 31, 1941.
3. Letter from rabbi Szulman (1), January 19, 1942.
4. Abram Roj's testimony, from 16 to the end of January 1942.
5. Szlama Winer and Michał Podchlebnik's testimony, January 19–21, 1942.
6. Rabbi Szulman's letter (2), late February 1942.
7. Rabbi Szulman's letter (3) via Brzeziny, after April 14, 1942.
8. Rabbi Szulman's letter (4) via Poddębice, after May 21, 1942.
9. Testimony of a Bund member from Turek, July 1942.

The delivery route of rabbi Szulman's letter remains unknown. We do not know whether it reached the ghetto directly, shortly after being sent – or if it arrived later with the deported inhabitants of the locality that was home to the rabbi's brother-in-law. Another mystery is the exact time when the letter reached the Łódź ghetto. Nevertheless, it remains a key document when it comes to the Łódź ghetto prisoners' knowledge about the camp in Chełmno, so I shall return to it later in this text. Similarly enigmatic is a letter sent as early as in December 1941 by an anonymous Poddębice resident to Mote Alszuler. According to Blumental, the letter, written in Yiddish, reached the Łódź ghetto on December 31, 1941, with its original safeguarded throughout the occupation by a ghetto resident named Pik.³² Unfortunately, nowhere aside from Blumental's publication can one find confirmation of either the time of its receipt or the effect it had upon reaching the Łódź ghetto.

As early as on January 21, 1942 (that is, two days after his conversation with Winer and on the day of his meeting with Podchlebnik), rabbi Szulman wrote another dramatic letter based on the escapees' accounts³³ and it was

²⁹ The liquidation of the so-called 'Gypsy camp' in the Łódź ghetto, which ended with the deportation of all its inmates to Chełmno, was carried out from January 5–12, 1942. See more in Julian Baranowski, *Zigeunerlager in Litzmannstadt 1941–1942. Obóz cygański w Łodzi 1941–1942* [Zigeunerlager in Litzmannstadt 1941–1942. Gypsy camp in Łódź 1941–1942 (Łódź: Dom Wydawniczy Księży Młyn, 2003)], p. 41.

³⁰ The first train transporting Jews from the Łódź ghetto left for Chełmno on January 16, 1942. More about the deportation later in the article.

³¹ *Dokumenty i materiały...*, p. 233.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 232.

³³ "List rabina Jakuba Szulmana do krewnych w getcie warszawskim [Letter from Rabbi Jakub Szulman to relatives in the Warsaw ghetto]," in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 1, p. 4.

delivered to Warsaw by Winer.³⁴ Szulman might have sent more letters.³⁵ He was not the only person who disseminated the news about the extermination being conducted in the nearby locality. On the same day A. Zontag sent a letter from Grabów to Warsaw, informing his relatives who were staying there of the following: “men, women, and children from the entire district have been taken away and they have followed in my father’s footsteps.”³⁶ On the same day Róża Kapłań’s letter was posted from Krośniewice to her husband, who was staying in Warsaw. Its content proved that the sender was aware of the crime being committed there and knew exactly where the extermination was taking place.³⁷ Confirmation of the seemingly fantastic news which reached Warsaw by mail came with Wołkowicz, who arrived in the Warsaw ghetto in February 1942,³⁸ as well as with Uszer Taube,³⁹ and predominantly Winer.⁴⁰ News about the camp in Chełmno was reaching other localities too, so it was only a matter of time before it reached the closed quarter in Łódź.

The first deportations from the Łódź ghetto were announced as early as December 16, 1941, when the Head of the Jewish Council of Elders, Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski, learned about the deportation from the ghetto scheduled for January 1, 1942 and that the closed quarter was to receive “laborers and specialists” from other localities. After the meeting a commission for deportations, the so-called commission of five, was established in the ghetto to draft lists of future deportees. Their number was set at 10,000.⁴¹ Information about the planned campaign immediately triggered a wave of rumors and anxiety, which incited Rumkowski to deliver a speech informing the ghetto prisoners about the German authorities’ order and his decision by virtue of which criminals, individuals avoiding work, and profiteers would be the first subject to deportation.⁴² Neither the speech nor the rumors which were going round mentioned the deportees’ destination or their expected fate.

Due to an outbreak of typhus fever in the ‘Gypsy camp’ the deportation of the Jews from the ghetto was postponed. The first to be deported to Chełmno were the remaining Roma from the ‘Gypsy camp’, purportedly to prevent the epidemic

³⁴ Ruta Sakowska’s finding (ibidem, p. 7, footnote 3).

³⁵ Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 132–134.

³⁶ Secret information about the extermination of the inhabitants of the nearby localities (“List A. Zontaga do rodziców w getcie warszawskim [Letter from A. Zontag to his parents in the Warsaw Ghetto],” in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 1, p. 9).

³⁷ “List Róży Kapłań do męża Szmuela [Letter from Róża Kapłań to her husband Szmuel],” in ibidem, p. 35.

³⁸ “Relacja Lajba Wołkowicza [Testimony of Lajb Wołkowicz],” in ibidem, vol. 9, pp. 70–73.

³⁹ “Relacja Uszera Taubego [Testimony of Uszer Taube],” in ibidem, pp. 57–64.

⁴⁰ “Relacja Jakuba Grojnowskiego (Szlamy Ber Winer) [Testimony of Jakub Grojnowski (real. Szlama Ber Winer)],” in ibidem, vol. 13, pp. 90–111.

⁴¹ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, pp. 302–303, entry of December 20, 1942.

⁴² Ibidem.

from spreading to the ghetto and city.⁴³ The first transports with the Roma left Łódź as early as January 5, 1942. In the course of several days, beginning with January 12, 1942, the remaining prisoners of the 'Gypsy camp' were also deported to Chełmno and murdered in gas chambers, with the death toll estimated at 4,300.⁴⁴ In his testimony Winer mentioned the arrival of that group and provided the details of its extermination.⁴⁵ The liquidation of the 'Gypsy camp' did not escape the ghetto residents' attention. *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* did take note of the deportation of the Roma, albeit without suspecting that they were murdered.⁴⁶

While liquidating the 'Gypsy camp', the German authorities prevented the information about the fate of the gradually liquidated Jewish centers in the Koło district from filtering into the ghetto. Mail delivery to and from the ghetto was discontinued on January 5, with money orders being the only permitted form of mail.⁴⁷ From the German authorities' point of view this step was perfectly justified. The information blockade proved effective, as the correspondence warning against the approaching deportation was no longer delivered to the Łódź ghetto.⁴⁸

Rumkowski also strove to lighten the atmosphere in the ghetto, which had been upset by the postponed deportation. In his New Year's speech he flatly criticized those who were spreading rumors that the entire ghetto would be deported and he assured that "nothing bad will happen to people of goodwill."⁴⁹ Those

⁴³ Eugen Jansen, the German commandant of the camp, died of typhus as early as December 1941, while the number of deaths among the Roma amounted to nearly 700 (Baranowski, *Zigeunerlager...*, pp. 37–41).

⁴⁴ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, vol. 2, pp. 107–108, entry of January 1–5, 1942; Baranowski, *Zigeunerlager...*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ "Relacja Jakuba Grojnowskiego (Szlamy Ber Winer) [Testimony of Jakub Grojnowski (real. Szlama Ber Winer) testimony]," in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 13, pp. 93–100.

⁴⁶ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, pp. 107–108, entry of January 1–5, 1942. The only detailed testimony devoted to the 'Gypsy camp' is the post-war one penned by Arnold Mostowicz. While writing it the author was aware of what had happened to the Roma deported from the ghetto. See Arnold Mostowicz, *Żółta gwiazda i czerwony krzyż* [Yellow star and red cross] (Łódź: Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana, 2014), p. 63.

⁴⁷ YIVO Archives in New York, RG-241/456, Obwieszczenie nr 352 z 8 I 1942 [Announcement no. 352 of January 8, 1942], p. 1; Löw, *Getto łódzkie...*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ The correspondence which was withheld proves that the blockade was effective. Among the thousands of surviving postcards, sent predominantly from the ghetto to the families in other towns, there is an undated postcard, probably penned in mid-1942, addressed to E. Piotrowska in Zduńska Wola. The first sentences written on it are: "I am writing another postcard to you because it is highly possible that more people will have to leave. Anyhow, I am not complaining. I have already accepted that." These sentences were underlined in red by the German censorship ("List Gitli Schwartz do E. Piotrowskiej [Letter of Gitla Schwatz to E. Piotrowska]," in *Niedopowiedziana historia. Karty pocztowe z getta łódzkiego* [Unfinished history. Postcards from the Łódź ghetto], ed. Adriana Bryk [Łódź: Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych, 2015], p. 135).

⁴⁹ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, p. 113, entry of January, 3 1942.

declarations, however, did not pacify the residents. On January 9 the German authorities ordered that summons be sent out to the first groups scheduled for deportation on January 16.⁵⁰ A lot was done to placate the deportees-to-be – their ghetto currency, dubbed *rumki*, was exchanged for German marks; they were given food (including soup with meat) at the assembly points; and those who did not have proper clothing were issued free warm clothes and clogs. On the day of the deportation everybody received half a loaf of bread and sausage for the road.⁵¹ The first train with the deportees left the Radegast station on January 16, 1942. Within the framework of the first wave of deportations, which began on January 29, 10,003 people were deported from the ghetto and murdered at Chełmno.⁵² The remaining residents did not know what happened to the deportees.

In mid-January the Kalisz Judenrat Chairman arrived in the ghetto. Back in December 1941 all residents of the Kalisz ghetto unable to work and all children below the age of 14 had been deported to Chełmno and murdered there.⁵³ During his conversation with Rumkowski the Chairman did not convey the information about the fate of the people deported from the closed quarter (or such information did not get out of the meeting). The official documents of the Jewish administration of the ghetto inform that “the ghetto has not received any precise information on which to base an idea as to the fate or even the whereabouts of the deportees.”⁵⁴ This intensified the rumors circulating in the ghetto, including those darkest ones not substantiated with any concrete information.⁵⁵

The weeks following the end of the January deportation campaign passed in an atmosphere of tension and anxiety. One of the versions of events was that the deportees had been transported to Polish villages, where they were put to work on farms.⁵⁶ Some of the suspicions concerning the fate of the deportees from the ghetto were recorded in *The Chronicle*, accompanied with a comment that “this mystery is depriving all the ghetto dwellers of sleep.”⁵⁷ During the second deportation wave, which began in late February 1942, the ghetto currency was no longer exchanged for the German mark. The immediate interpretation was that people were being deported to the General Government, where that currency was not legal tender. *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* reads:

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 121, entry of January 10–13, 1942.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 124, entry of January 14–31, 1942.

⁵² Sitarek, “Wire Bound State”..., pp. 216–217; *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*..., vol. 5, p. 287.

⁵³ *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, vol. 2, part A, p. 61.

⁵⁴ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*..., vol. 2, p. 128, entry of January 14–31, 1942.

⁵⁵ Löw, *Getto łódzkie*..., p. 214.

⁵⁶ Oskar Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto. Notebooks from Łódź* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 31–32.

⁵⁷ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*..., vol. 2, p. 128, entry of February 1942.

Many widely varied stories appeared in the ghetto concerning the fate of the deportees. It was said, for example, that the deportees were set free in Koluszki; those who spread this unverified information claimed that this news had come from many deportees in Warsaw. Another rumor had it that the *deportees were in Koło county* [my emphasis – A. S.] and also in the vicinity of Brześć Kujawski.⁵⁸

What did not inspire optimism was that at the Radegast railway station “most of the guards ordered the deportees to throw away their knapsacks and often even the bundles they were carrying by hand, including the food supplies.”⁵⁹ That was a marked difference in comparison to the Germans’ behavior during the January deportations, which seems to have meant they were paying less attention to keeping up appearances.

The fact that the above entry in *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* mentions Koło district as the destination proves that, despite the information blockade imposed on the ghetto, certain information that quite precisely specified the deportation’s destination did find its way into the ghetto. Surviving correspondence from other localities indicates that at that moment the knowledge about Chełmno was relatively widespread among their Jewish residents.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ In early February Szlama Winer reached Piotrków Trybunalski. On February 22, 1942, when the deportations from the Łódź ghetto resumed, he was already in Warsaw, while Abram Roj was in Wierzbnik (Nowicki, “Zanim przybył z zaświatów”..., p. 186). People in many localities in the province also knew about Chełmno, see Róża Kapłań’s correspondence in *Archiwum Ringelbluma...*, vol. 1, pp. 32–53 as well as other letters in ibidem, pp. 56–57, 69. See also Ruta Sakowska, *Dwa etapy. Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydów w oczach ofiar* [Two stages. The Nazi policy of exterminating the Jews as seen by the victims] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), pp. 31–32. The information obtained and then transferred by the Polish underground, which reached not only Poles, was not without importance either. The first, still imprecise piece of news about the deportation of the Jews of Koło to the camp was published in *Informacja Bieżąca* on January 26, 1942. More precise news was provided in the ZWZ-AK (Union of Armed Combat – Home Army) Łódź Region’s report codename ‘Kreton’ of January 28, 1942, which informed about the deportations and the murder in Chełmno of the Jews from Koło, Turek district, and Łódź, along with a group of Roma. That report reached Warsaw on February 6, becoming the basis for an article published in *Informacja Bieżąca* on February 16, 1942. Three days later the information about the crimes in Chełmno was published in vol. 7 (no. 111) of *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, though it was very laconic and included in the Miscellaneous section (Adam Puławski, *W obliczu Zagłady. Rząd RP na Uchodźstwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ-AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady (1941–1942)* [Facing the Holocaust. The Government of the Republic of Poland in Exile, the Government Delegation of Poland’s Office at Home, the ZWZ-AK in the face of deportation of Jews to extermination camps (1941–1942)] [Lublin: IPN, 2009], pp. 96–97, 105, 107). One of the informers of the Polish underground was probably Stanisław Kaszyński, an employee of the Chełmno Judenrat exposed in late January after trying to send information about the camp’s operation to the West. He was arrested and then murdered in the Rzechów

Before the Łódź ghetto's residents learned the tragic truth, the information about the fate of the deported reached the Head of the local Jewish Council of Elders. It remains uncertain, however, at which point exactly Rumkowski learned about the operation of the camp at Chełmno. Andrea Löw, a scholar of the Łódź ghetto, drew attention to the change in the tenor of Rumkowski's speeches at the turn of February and March 1942, when the Council Head began to lay increasing emphasis on the necessity to increase employment in the departments operating in the ghetto.⁶¹ Rumkowski and his co-workers might have wondered about the fact that, unlike the case of earlier deportations to forced labor camps, now the German authorities were neither informing about the exact destination nor giving clear answers. Analyzing Rumkowski's public speeches, one can notice that in mid-January (that is, right after the beginning of the first deportations), tenor of Rumkowski's speeches markedly changed. In his January 17 speech he stated the following: "At the moment we are on the threshold of very harsh times, which everybody should realize."⁶² He then went on to say:

At present, when I am deporting 10,000 people from the ghetto, I cannot remain silent on this sad topic [...]. Today, when I am deporting a gang of various hustlers and frauds from the ghetto I am doing this this fully confident that these people have partially deserved this fate.⁶³

This argumentation runs counter to the hope expressed several sentences later and "based on authoritative data" that "the fate of the expelled will not be as tragic as has been suspected in the ghetto".⁶⁴ Hence, Rumkowski's words seem to indirectly confirm the information on the rumors circulating in the ghetto about the deportees' tragic fate.

In the same speech Rumkowski promised a significant increase in the number of factory workers, clearly stressing that only work could save people from the worst oppression.⁶⁵ This can be linked to the dawn of the survival-through-labor strategy. Rumkowski concluded that increasing employment and making

forest in early February 1942. See more in Dorota Siepracka, "Stanisław Kaszyński wobec eksterminacji Żydów w obozie zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem [Stanisław Kaszynski vis-à-vis the extermination of Jews in the Chełmno nad Nerem death camp]," in *Kto w takich czasach Żydów przechowuje? Polacy niosący pomoc ludności żydowskiej w okresie okupacji niemieckiej* [Who shelters Jews in such times? Poles bringing aid to the Jewish population during the German occupation], ed. Aleksandra Namysło (Warsaw: IPN, 2009).

⁶¹ Löw, *Getto Łódzkie...*, p. 229.

⁶² Speech of January 17, 1942, in *"Słuchają słów Prezesa..." Księga przemówień Mordechaja Chaima Rumkowskiego* ["They listen to the Chairman's words..." Book of speeches by Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski], eds Adam Sitarek, Michał Trębacz (Łódź: Archiwum Państwowe, Uniwersytet Łódzki. Centrum Badań Żydowskich, 2011), p. 69.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

Jewish laborers indispensable to the German occupier were the only thing that could protect ghetto residents from deportation into the unknown.⁶⁶ In his later speeches Rumkowski often returned to this issue, assuring that production and employment would increase. "Labor is my currency", he emphasized.⁶⁷ The speech he delivered on March 2, 1942 bore a highly telling title – "Everybody must work!". The address was given in the face of the increasing "dissemination of grievous news and prognoses"⁶⁸, for it was the period of the second and also largest wave of deportations to Chełmno. A fragment of this speech might suggest that Rumkowski knew what had happened to the deportees from the ghetto. Let me quote one of its first sentences, which reported on the policy of increasing employment that he adopted: "Our current experience indicates that the fundamental principle of the times we live in is: *labor protects one from death* [my emphasis – A. S]."⁶⁹ This was the first use of the word 'death' in official documents of the Jewish administration of the ghetto in reference to the fate of the Jews deported from the ghetto. Rumkowski's words coincided with a testimony quoted by Fiszel Brejtsztajn from Żychlin, who reached Grabów in mid-February and met with rabbi Szulman. After hearing his story the rabbi purportedly called on the leaders of the Grabów Jewish community to write a letter to the surrounding towns, including Łódź. The letter is said to have reached Rumkowski, who nonetheless disbelieved its content.⁷⁰ This information is difficult to verify, but it does coincide with the speech quoted above. Consequently, it is probable that Rumkowski and the small group of his co-workers and top officials to whom he addressed his March 2 speech did learn then about what was happening with the people deported from the ghetto, though such was not yet common knowledge.

Mentions in surviving diaries penned during that period do not confirm the deportees' tragic fate. In his notes jotted down in early March Oskar Rosenfeld only repeated the German authorities' assertions that the deported were transported "to the countryside [...] to work for Polish peasants."⁷¹ It was puzzling to Dawid Sierakowiak that in late March, in the face of the deportation, 120 people "paid a fortune" to join their relatives in Warsaw.⁷² According to

⁶⁶ Sitarek, "Wire Bound State" ..., p. 226.

⁶⁷ Speech of February 1, 1942, in "Słuchają słów Prezesa...", p. 80.

⁶⁸ Speech of February 2, 1942, *ibidem*, p. 85.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

⁷⁰ Montague, *Chełmno...*, pp. 133–134. Basing on Shmuel Huppert's *King of the Ghetto: Mordecai Haim Rumkowski, the Elder of Lodz Ghetto* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1983), in footnote 14 on p. 245 Montague provides information which is difficult to verify. He claims that a clerk from the Jewish administration of the Łódź ghetto, Solomon Uberbaum, stated that Brejtsztajn personally delivered the letter to Rumkowski.

⁷¹ Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning...*, p. 32.

⁷² Dawid Sierakowiak, *Dziennik* [Diary], eds Ewa Wiatr, Adam Sitarek (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2016), p. 223.

The Chronicle, they resembled “rats abandoning a sinking ship.”⁷³ A certain clue as to what was known about the deportees’ fate could be the statistical data concerning population shifts in the ghetto drafted in the Department of Population Registration. The data for 1942 compiled in early March include categories such as “Deported”, “Left for the GG and Warthegau”, and “Deported for labor”.⁷⁴ The division of the deportees into these three separate groups might mean that the German authorities’ assertions that the ghetto residents were deported to labor were not substantiated with sufficient documentation required in the case of actual deportations to labor camps or factories situated outside the ghetto. The same applied to the departure of a group of physicians to the provincial ghettos in Wartheland in late March 1942. It was clearly stated that their departure differed from mass deportations: unlike the deportees “they left along with their families, taking all their possessions, including their medical instruments, with them.”⁷⁵

With the growing anxiety in the ghetto caused by the deportation campaigns, the German authorities tried to appease the situation by, for instance, permitting ghetto residents to send postcards again. Their number limited to a thousand a day, these postcards/forms briefly informed their addressees about the sender’s health. Sending these laconic, censored messages during the deportations was to create an impression that life in the ghetto was going on as usual.⁷⁶ That might have also been why in mid-April 1942, that is, after over 44,000 Jews from the Łódź ghetto had been murdered in Chełmno, the commandant of that death camp, Hans Bothmann, who had replaced Herbert Lange just a month earlier, visited the closed quarter.⁷⁷ Rumkowski learned from Bothmann about the deportees’ destination. The commandant said that the deported individuals were detained in *a camp near Koło* [my emphasis – A. S.], which, as it was observed, was in line with the most popular rumors in the ghetto. The camp’s capacity was 100,000 people. It was said to be well-equipped and supplied with food, and that the detainees were employed repairing roads and performing agricultural tasks. Workshops were to be set up in the very near future.⁷⁸ This information, however, did not alleviate the residents’ anxiety. The people still feared new deportations, with their angst and worry fueled by the incoming information about the beginning of the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto.⁷⁹

⁷³ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, p. 136, entry of March 1942.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 143. When in June 1942 they returned to the Łódź ghetto after the liquidation of the provincial ghettos, they brought information that the rumors going round the ghetto that the transports of deportees were sent to small localities in the province proved false.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

⁷⁷ *Świadectwa Zagłady...*, pp. 31–32.

⁷⁸ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, p. 145, entry of April 10–14, 1942.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 145–146.

The worst suspicions were confirmed when deportees from provincial ghettos in Wartheland reached the Łódź ghetto. The first groups arrived in Łódź in May 1942,⁸⁰ bringing news about the course of the liquidation campaigns in their localities. "This tragedy defies description,"⁸¹ wrote Henryk Fogel on May 21, 1942 in his diary reporting on the information about the liquidation of the provincial ghettos. First and foremost, the newcomers also brought their knowledge about the Chełmno camp's actual purpose. According to a post-war testimony given by an employee of the Jewish administration of the ghetto, Izrael Tabaksblat, rabbi Sylman's letter reached the ghetto with the deportees from one of the provincial towns.⁸² Józef Kermisz claims that the rabbi's actual surname was Szulman and that the letter and its duplicate reached the ghetto with deportees from Poddębice, that is, on April 14.⁸³ By contrast, Andrea Löw noted that according to Tabaksblat, he received the letter from a deportee from Brzeziny,⁸⁴ that is after May 21.⁸⁵ Brzeziny is also mentioned in Yankiel Nirenberg's memoir as the town from which Szulman's letter reached the ghetto. Nirenberg wrote: "Two people gave us precise information about Koło and Chełmno. At first, a Jew from Brzeziny brought a postcard which he had received from a rabbi from Grabów [that is, Szulman – A. S.]. The man said that the rabbi had talked with three Jews who had escaped from Chełmno who told him what had happened there."⁸⁶ Nirenberg wrote that the letter from the rabbi had been read out during a meeting of the Bund party committee: "the emotions we experienced are difficult to describe."⁸⁷ He then went on to describe the Bund members' initiative to inform Rumkowski about the deportation's actual goal, to which end they recruited his close co-worker, Zionist Izrael Tabaksblat. The man returned with news that Rumkowski had been in the know from other sources for quite some time. The Bund members also found out on that occasion that Rumkowski's confidante Pinkus Gerszowski had been aware of the extermination conducted at Chełmno since more or less early May, when two Polish laborers informed him about it. The second source of Nirenberg's information was a Bund member from Turek whose sister purportedly learned the details of the mass extermination of Jews and Roma at Chełmno from a Polish man she knew. In the

⁸⁰ Danuta Dąbrowska, "Zagłada skupisk żydowskich w Kraju Warty w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej [The extermination of Jewish communities in Wartheland during the Nazi occupation]," *Biuletyn ŻIH* 13/14 (1955): 137.

⁸¹ Yad Vashem Archive, O.33/1569, Dziennik Heńka Vogla [Heniek Vogel's diary], pp. 61–62.

⁸² *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 1, p. 7, footnote 3.

⁸³ *Dokumenty i materiały...*, vol. 2: *Akcje i wysiedlenia* [Actions and displacements], ed. Józef Kermisz (Warsaw–Łódź–Cracow: Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, 1946), p. xi.

⁸⁴ Löw, *Getto łódzkie...*, p. 227.

⁸⁵ Dąbrowska, "Zagłada skupisk...", p. 158, table 2.

⁸⁶ Yankl Nirenberg, *Memoirs of the Lodz Ghetto* (Toronto: Lugus Libros, 2003), p. 53. The original memoir was published in Yiddish in 1948 in New York.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

end Nirenberg remarked that they tried to pass the information they obtained to other Bund members in the Warsaw ghetto.⁸⁸ A similar step, that is, the transfer of Szulman's letter to Warsaw, was also undertaken by the Zionists, as was mentioned by Tabaksblat.⁸⁹ Neither of them could know that the comprehensive testimony given by Winer had been in the Warsaw ghetto for several months.

Irrespective of the growing circles of people who knew the truth about Chełmno, the German authorities were conducting a disinformation campaign. One of its elements was writing postcards to family members – a few people who knew German were picked out from those headed for death and ordered to write comforting postcards to their relatives, after which they were executed. The postcards were also sent to the Łódź ghetto. The April 30 entry in *The Chronicle* informed that “a postcard from a village near Turek had arrived in the ghetto by indirect means. It was sent by a family resettled in January and reported that they were in good health.”⁹⁰

By May 1942 a growing number of ghetto residents had become aware of the deportations' destination, though it was still not common knowledge. On May 20 Sierakowiak, a well-informed active member of youth organizations, recorded the rumor about “an enormous ghetto for all Jews in the Reich.”⁹¹ The worst case scenario found confirmation with the delivery of the deportee's personal belongings to the ghetto.⁹² In May 1942 Oskar Rosenfeld, an employee of the ghetto administration's Archive Department included the following literary description in his diary, which he kept in secret:

700,000,000 Jews are running over rural road between potato fields... Bombs from airplanes, then machine gun... Then gas... Then the clothing with bloodstained holes sent back to the resorts. The dreamer has to clean them, recognizes his father's suit...⁹³

The following weeks only confirmed the most pessimistic versions, and the news spread across almost the entire ghetto. Resettled into the Łódź ghetto from Vienna, Irene Hauser, who did not hold any position in the ghetto administration, wrote the following in her July 19 diary entry: “Those deported from here from May 5 to 15 were probably gassed, that is, killed.”⁹⁴

Aware that the ghetto residents knew about the actual goal of the deportations, Rumkowski began to increasingly often argue in his speeches that some individuals should be sacrificed to save others. His aim was to justify

⁸⁸ Ibidem, pp. 53–54.

⁸⁹ Löw, *Getto łódzkie...*, p. 227.

⁹⁰ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto...*, vol. 2, p. 155, entry of April 29–30, 1942.

⁹¹ Sierakowiak, *Dziennik*, p. 255.

⁹² Ibidem, p. 263.

⁹³ Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning...*, p. 109.

⁹⁴ Irene Hauser, *Cud, że ręka jeszcze pisze...* [It's a miracle I can still move my hand to write...], trans. Jerzy W. Solecki (Warsaw: Libellus, 1993), p. 30.

his “salvation-though-labor” policy. During his famously poignant speech on September 4, 1942, which announced the deportation campaign dubbed *wielka szpera* [the great blockade; Ger. – *Sperre*, in Polish the verb *szperać* means ‘search, snoop’], Rumkowski spoke openly about sacrificing those unable to work, that is, children and the elderly, for the purpose of saving the productive element.⁹⁵ The ghetto residents were in shock. From then on there could be no doubts as to the fate of those deported from the ghetto to Chełmno.

Despite the German authorities’ endeavors, the ghetto residents did indeed find out about the mass extermination of those deported from it. The news reached the closed quarter much later than other localities in Wartheland or even in the General Government (Piotrków Trybunalski and Warsaw). An important factor here was the German authorities’ information blockade consisting of suspending mail. Nor were the campaigns of intentional misinformation concerning the deportees’ fate without significance. Despite this, by making avail of the relatively limited amount of information, the Jews managed altogether precisely to locate the place where the extermination was being conducted. Grabów was the key point on the route whereby flowed the information about the operation about the camp in Chełmno. The key figure in Grabów in that respect was rabbi Jakub Szulman, who tried to inform the Jews in the area about the crimes described to him by eye witnesses – escapees from the camp. It is probable that the first recipient of the information about the camp in Chełmno was the Jewish administration of the ghetto, which initially withheld it from wider circles of people. When a group of several thousand deportees from the provincial ghettos arrived in the Łódź ghetto in the spring of 1942 it became impossible to continue keeping information about the crimes a secret.

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⁹⁵ See <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/przemowienie-chaima-rumkowskiego-zapowiadajace-wielka-szpera>; <https://www.holocausthistoricalsociety.org.uk/contents/jewishaccounts/chaim-rumkowskispeech.html> (accessed: 3 July, 2025).

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